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PRRC emerging trends

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United Methodists Striving for Unity

A survey commissioned earlier this year by the United Methodist Church found that although there may be signs of a generation gap between younger and older members, and a gender gap between its male and female members, the majority are striving for harmony within the church.

The great majority say that if they disagreed with their general conference they would voice their dissent through discussions with the pastors or by writing letters of protest.

The membership is divided in deciding whether community service or spiritual matters should be the church's top priority, but very few feel the church should attempt to change society.

In forming these views and in interpreting the day-to-day events of the world, about half of the United Methodists surveyed say they are most influenced by newspapers and television. One in four is most influenced by the Bible. Those who are fifty or older (32 percent) are twice as likely as younger Methodists (15 percent) to rely most on the Bible.

The opinions of friends and relatives have greater influence on members (17 percent) than those of church leaders (5 percent).

Half of the United Methodists see their denomination's top priority as either preaching the Gospel (26 percent) or the spiritual care of their own members (26 percent). Women and members who are 50 or older are slightly more likely than men and those who are younger to stress these goals.

One member in three believes the top priority of the United Methodist Church should be to serve the community. Men (43 percent) and younger members (37 percent) are those most likely to stress community service over the Gospel or spiritual care. Only one member in 20 (5 percent), however, views changing society as the church's primary goal.

Most United Methodists (75 percent) say that if they were in disagreement with a stand taken by their church, they would talk it over with their pastor. About three in 10 (29 percent) would seek a wider forum by writing a letter to a church newspaper or to one of the United Methodist national agencies.

The views of a strong minority, however, demonstrate how issues can be disruptive by maintaining that in cases of disagreement they would take such drastic actions as to go to another church (28 percent), quit going to church (15 percent), or withdraw their financial support of the church (19 percent).

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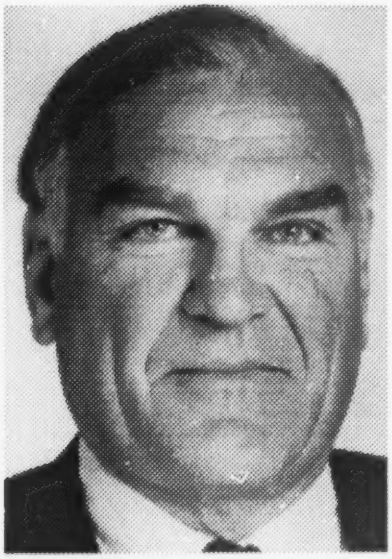
CHURCH'S TOP PRIORITY

Which of the following [listed below] do you think should be the church's top priority?

	Total Methodists	Ages 18 – 49	Ages 50 & older	Male	Female
Serve the community	35%	37%	31%	43%	28%
Preach the Gospel	26	24	29	24	28
Spiritual care of church members	26	25	26	23	28
Change society	5	6	4	6	4
Add members	1	0	1	1	1
All of the above	4	5	4	1	7
Not sure	3	2	4	2	4

Empowering the Laity

By George H. Gallup, Jr.



To a growing extent, survey evidence indicates, the Church of the future will be shaped from the "bottom up" rather than the "top down." And so it becomes increasingly important to give the laity a voice in the leadership of churches. In one survey we discovered that Americans by a 6-to-1 ratio said the laity (the people who attend religious services) should have greater influence in their churches. The ratio is yet higher among young upscale groups, who will provide a large share of the leadership of churches in the future.

One would have to conclude that if church leaders are not sensitive to the growing demands of the laity to have a role in leadership, organized religion could show further signs of slippage in the years ahead. This does not mean, of course, that the laity should take over the leadership of a given church — the clergy in charge are the authority in spiritual matters — but the laity can do much to relieve the burden of the clergy.

I would like to say how much I, as a layman, appreciate the opportunity today to practice my lay ministry, speaking to you during your religious services.

The fact is, I do consider survey research in the area of religion as a form of ministry. If I were a clergyman — and I once had planned to be — one of the first things I would do in coming to a new church would be to open up the communications process in my church with the help of surveys. The key and vital role of a leader of a church, I'm sure you will agree, is to lead parishioners to ever deeper levels of faith. To do this, surveys can be very helpful in shedding light on levels of religious belief, practice and knowledge, as well as spiritual problems and needs — and to measure the degree of progress or lack of progress.

Increasingly across the nation, churches are using surveys as an aid to long-range planning. And sometimes surveys are useful in the process of searching for a new Rector or Bishop.

I would like to take a moment to discuss the role of religion in the U.S. in the broad sense. What is often missing from media coverage of religion is the people in the pews, the people whose lives are influenced by the actions of church leaders and who, literally, make up the church's body. The "top down" approach characterizes much of organized religious life. When it comes to religion, Americans do not see their role, as it once was, to "pay, pray and obey." They see their role as taking part fully in church life; the church, they believe, serves them, not the other way around.

Without commenting on the merits of this, the fact is, what has been missing, I believe, is an understanding of what we call *The People's Religion* (the title of a book written by Jim Castelli and me), the contours of faith that exists within the American people, often irrespective of their institutional religious ties.

Certainly, every good pastor, just like any other leader in society, has a sense of the nature and needs of his people. Social science surveys can provide unique and vital information about people. It's common in religious circles to talk dismissively about not wanting to "govern by the polls." Of course, religious leaders should no more "govern by polls" than should any other leader — if so doing means changing core beliefs to suit every change in fashion. But no one can truly lead without knowing what the people think and believe, and polls can provide that vital information.

Polls are in many ways a populist device: they empower the people themselves by letting them know what their neighbors, what all other Americans believe. And above all, they give the people a voice in leadership — whether of churches or of the nation.

Surveys enhance the listening process in churches. In his book, *Between Two Worlds*, the English author and evangelist John Stott offers this advice about listening:

> The best preachers know the people and understand the human scene in all its pain and pleasure, glory and tragedy. And the quickest way to gain such an understanding is to shut our mouths and open our eyes and ears. We need to ask people questions and get them talking. Clergy should encourage people to talk about and tell about their home and family life, their job, their expertise, and their spare time interests. We need to penetrate beyond their doing into the thinking.

One way of "listening" is to conduct a survey in a congregation or community to find out what people are thinking, what they know, what they believe, and what they see as needs for their church. This knowledge will not only improve the quality of congregational planning, but will also improve the quality of communication within the church by improving listening skills and helping people to talk more openly with one another.

Survey findings can replace hunches, guesswork and wishful thinking with objective information. Using a church survey can be a constructive and creative experience that can inform and build up the community and generate participation at every level.

In one sense, a survey can serve effectively as a tool of evangelism, as well as a measurement of faith. It can pose questions which challenge the reader to make choices that relate to the basic tenets of faith. Responding honestly to such questions has the potential to change a person, or to start him on the road to change. For many, acknowledging unbelief is the first step toward belief.

There are, I believe, three basic reasons why public opinion polls on religion are important:

The first is sociological: differences in religion are often a greater factor informing public opinion than differences in gender, race or education. Social scientists seem to have been rather slow in recognizing this fact. They have tended to leave the inner life — prayer, religious experiences, and the like — relatively unexplored.

The second is practical: it is impossible to plan for successful leadership without knowing what people believe, and need.

The third reason is religious: believers, and those who would study believers, need to understand the way people view their relationship to God.

Finally, a word about the follow-up to a survey. A survey is not worth undertaking unless it leads to specific action steps. What are the strengths upon which a church should build? What are the major challenges? What steps need to be taken to deal with these strengths and these challenges? What specific steps can be undertaken to deepen the faith of parishioners? What can be done to maintain a productive balance between inner renewal and social renewal?

You may have a wonderful clergy who serve you well as your spiritual leaders. But without your active support they can do only so much. It's up to YOU.

John Coburn, former Bishop of Massachusetts, wrote this:

> Nobody is going to change the church except the people of the church. And they are going to change it by the quality of their lives. When the spirit of Christ is welcomed into their hearts and minds, and they are determined to live henceforth, not for themselves but for him, then the power will be from on high to renew, reform, empower the church. The new day for the church rises from the new day of Christians living the story of their lives together with the living story of Jesus and his love.

From a sermon given by George H. Gallup, Jr. at the Church of the Good Samaritan, Paoli, Pennsylvania, on "Survey Sunday," September 27, 1992. This day was set aside to ask all parishioners to fill out questionnaires while they were at church services — one way to ensure a high response rate!

(Continued from page 3)

United Methodists

Six members in 10 had anticipated that this year's general conference of The United Methodist Church would greatly (14 percent) or somewhat (46 percent) affect their local church. Disagreeing were 30 percent of the membership who felt it would not have much effect at all, while 10 percent held no opinion on the matter. Male members and those who are over 50 were the most likely dismiss the conference's impact on local affairs.

The survey was conducted by The Gallup Organization for the *United Methodist Reporter*. The findings are based on telephone interviews with a randomly selected national sample of 318 adults who identify themselves as members of the United Methodist Church, conducted during February and March 1992. For results based on this size, one can say with 95 percent confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects could be 6 percentage points in either direction.

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Public Image of Clergy Hits New Low

During the past few years there has been a slight decline in the confidence that the public holds of the clergy. There was a time when the clergy was at the very top of the list of American occupations ranked by the public as having high standards of honesty and ethics. Positive ratings peaked in 1985 when two persons in three ranked them highly.

By 1988, however, when the televangelist scandals began having an impact, favorable ratings of the clergy dropped to 60 percent, and for the first time they were rated second to pharmacists for honesty and ethics.

Further declines have continued to occur to this year when public confidence in the clergy has reached its lowest point ever, with just a bare majority now rating them "very high" (15 percent) or "high" (39 percent) in honesty and ethical standards. One person in three (33 percent) considers clergy ethics to be just average, while 7 percent say they are "low" and 2 percent consider them "very low."

The clergy, however, still are often rated higher for ethics and honesty than other groups that usually are given good grades by the public such as physicians, college faculty members, dentists and engineers.

Police images tend to go up and down according to the headlines — the Rodney King incident has not helped them recently. Other groups such as journalists, bankers, and lawyers seldom get many top ratings for honesty and ethical standards.

Congress has had a rough year in the public estimate, and those hoping for re-election year should be aware that most members of the public believe the levels of honesty and ethics practiced in the halls of Congress are only a little bit higher than those generally found on a used car lot!

The findings are based on telephone interviews by The Gallup Organization with a nationwide representative sample of 1,206 adults, ages 18 and older, conducted on June 26 – 29, 1992.

For findings based on samples of this size, one can say with 95 percent confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects could be 3 percentage points in either direction.

In addition to sampling error, the reader should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias in the findings of opinion polls.

THE TREND OF THOSE RATING THE CLERGY'S HONESTY AND ETHICS HIGHLY

(Combined "very high" and "high" ratings)

	%	RANK
1992	54	2nd
1991	57	2nd
1990	55	2nd
1988	60	2nd
1985	67	1st
1983	64	1st
1981	63	1st
1977	61	1st

RATINGS ON HONESTY AND ETHICAL STANDARDS — 1992

How would you rate the honesty and ethical standards of people in these various fields — very high, high, average, low, or very low?

	High	Average	Low
Pharmacists	66%	28%	4%
Clergy	54	33	9
Physicians	52	38	9
College teachers	50	38	5
Dentists	50	38	5
Engineers	48	40	3
Police	42	42	10
Funeral directors	35	46	10
Journalists	27	54	15
Bankers	27	53	17
Lawyers	18	43	36
Congressmen	11	43	43
Car salesmen	5	32	59

"No opinion" (1% – 9%) is not shown.

Americans Feel Religion Is Just One of the Causes of World Population Problems

Many Americans no longer are concerned about overpopulation in this country. Over 20 years ago in 1971, 41 percent considered it a major problem, compared to 29 percent who feel the same way today.

Looking towards the future, however, almost as many people now 44 percent) as 20 years ago (46 percent) feel overpopulation will become a problem in this country.

Half the population believe it is in our interest to help slow the rate of population growth overseas, and would favor an increase in U.S. economic aid and technical assistance to help developing countries to slow their population growth.

People identify a wide range of causes that are contributing overpopulation in developing countries. Two in three or more people view poor sex education, lack of access to birth control, ignorance and poverty as very important causes.

Nearly half of Americans say religious beliefs are a very important cause, and an additional 32 percent say they are "somewhat" important.

Improved health care for children and women, better education, and better access to birth control receive high levels of support as solutions to the problem.

The public is fairly evenly divided on the use abortion as a solution, with a slight majority approving.

Most people, however, oppose such drastic measures as limiting family size or involuntary sterilization to control population growth in developing countries.

The findings are based on a nationwide telephone survey of 1,002 adults, conducted by The Gallup Organization on April 9 - 12, 1992.

Reasons for Overpopulation

Here are some of the reasons given for the high rate of births in developing countries. Please tell me whether you feel each one is a very important reason, somewhat important reason, not too important reason, or not san important reason at all.

	Very important	Somewhat important	Not important
Lack of sex education	70%	19%	8%
Lack of access to birth control	69	20	8
Ignorance	66	20	11
Poverty	64	21	13
Poor status of women	50	30	15
Religious beliefs	47	32	18
Promiscuity	45	27	20
Cultural traditions	42	37	16
"Macho" values	33	32	29
Economic need for families to have many children	32	29	33

Proposed Solutions

Now, I am going to read some ways that have been proposed to control population growth in developing countries. Please tell me whether you generally favor generally oppose each one as I read the list.

	Total	Protestant	Catholic
Improving children's health care	97%	98%	97%
Improving literacy and education	97	97	97
Improving women's health care	96	98	95
Making birth control information widely available	95	96	91
Improving the status of women	91	91	89
Providing low cost birth control to all women who want it	91	93	87
Providing free birth control to all women who want it	85	87	82
Free sterilization for all who want it	77	78	69
Encouraging sexual abstinence	67	68	68
Making abortions easily available to any women who want them	53	52	50
Restricting number of children a family can have	24	27	21
Sterilizing women after they have had three children	21	24	15

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1992 Religion in America Report

The soon to be published **Religion in America 1992** report marks the 25th anniversary of the initiation of these regular and eagerly-awaited publications, which present facts and interpretations of the latest trends in religious beliefs and practices, as well as the public's changing views on the impact of religion on society.

Many of the indicators reported have become the basic standard measurements of organized religion in the United States.

This report will present a detailed analysis of church attendance and membership by key population groups, and by major faiths and denominations. A special commentary by George Gallup, Jr. will set forth the major challenges and growing opportunities facing churches in the immediate years ahead.

If you preach, write, or teach, we sincerely believe you will find this PRRC publication to be a constant aid in your mission.

Special pre-publication offer: Those who order **Religion in America 1992** now, will also receive a free copy of **100 Questions and Answers.** Written by George Gallup, Jr. and Sarah Jones, this book contains 100 of the most important questions we have surveyed in the area of religion.

This book, which represents the distillation of many recent Gallup surveys, deals in depth with each of 100 topics — analysis by key demographic groups, trends, background information and tables. Selections include religious belief and ethics, religion and politics, religious experience and spiritual development and commitment. This book will provide important historical trends to supplement the latest information contained in **Religion in America 1992.**

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